



TITLE:

<Book Reviews>Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, Guillaume Rozenberg, and Alicia Turner, eds. Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, xxvii+261p.

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CITATION:

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ISSUE DATE:

2015-12

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/203083>

RIGHT:

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Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma

BÉNÉDICTE BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE, GUILLAUME ROZENBERG, and ALICIA TURNER, eds.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, xxvii + 261p.

Exciting things are happening in the study of Burmese Buddhism. Recent years have seen the publication of very important contributions to our understanding of this field. In particular, investigations of the roots of the “mindfulness” meditation phenomenon as a Burmese reaction to colonialism have garnered attention far beyond a scholarly audience concerned with Burma exclusively (for example, Braun 2013). Though fascinating, this focus on the origins and spread of the so-called *vipassanā* meditation movement has neglected what Kate Crosby, in the preface to *Champions of Buddhism*, calls “the Other Burmese Buddhism,” by which she means the popular yet politically marginal set of practices belonging to the so-called *weikza*-path. It is to examining this path that *Champions of Buddhism* is devoted, both as an introduction to this under-investigated phenomenon and as a stimulus to further inquiries into the nature of Buddhism in Burma and Buddhist global modernity in general. In both respects, it succeeds marvelously.

Unless they are experts in Burmese Buddhism, readers may at this point wonder what exactly is meant by the term *weikza*. In the foreword to the volume, the editors give a good idea by describing *weikza* as “a religious virtuoso” (p. ix). Because of his behavior, meditation skills, and expertise in the magical arts, a *weikza* attains the ability to live very long, with the purpose of being present when the next Buddha, Maitreya, appears in our world. Though the usage of magic with the explicit purpose of lengthening one’s life may not sound very “Buddhist” to some, one argument that this volume forcefully makes is that such practices are as Buddhist as monks singing sutras or meditating in temples. In her preface (the book has both a foreword and a preface, but—puzzlingly—no introduction), Crosby explores this alternative Burmese Buddhism by sketching the practical, political, and ideological motivations that have kept it in obscurity for so long. Together with Steven Collins’ postscript, Crosby’s piece connects the materials in the volume to a larger context, a context that is sometimes lost in the detailed accounts collected here.

The main body of the volume is divided into three thematic parts. In the first, the *weikza*

phenomenon is further defined by contrasting it to a number of other Burmese Buddhist and non-Buddhist indigenous practices. In chapter 1, Patrick Pranke distinguishes *weikza* from another, better known ideal, that of the *arahant* (Sanskrit: *arhat*). Whereas the latter are the ultimate goal of practitioners in the *vipassanā* tradition, the former belong to a different, esoteric path. Nevertheless, both *arhats* and *weikza* are revered after their physical body has disappeared (which does not mean that they are considered “dead”). In the course of his description, Pranke provides a useful history of Buddhism in colonial and postcolonial Burma, serving to orient the reader for the chapters to come. In the next chapter, Juliane Schober expands this comparison between *vipassanā* and *weikza* practices by affirming that, although *weikza* are certainly marginalized politically (not having strong connections with the Burmese leaders), doctrinally they are firmly Theravāda Buddhist. In the last chapter of the first part, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière introduces a final distinction, namely between different types of spirit mediums: on the one hand, there are the *nat gadaw*, who contact the spirits of dead Burmese kings. On the other, there are the *bodaw* or *medaw*, who contact the spirits of physically departed *weikza*. Brac de la Perrière’s discussion is interesting for several reasons, not in the least because the division she describes is gendered: whereas *weikza* mediums tend to be male, *nat gadaw* tend to be female.

The second part of the book then details the role of *weikza* as protectors of Buddhism. In what I found the most stimulating contribution to the volume, Niklas Foxeus shows that the *ariya-weikza* organization, a millenarian group centered around a historical person who claimed to be a *weikza*, can be adequately characterized as a Buddhist fundamentalist group with an anti-Western and anti-colonial agenda. Though the group does not itself perpetrate violence, adherents claim their meditation efforts and rituals lead to the demise of many who threaten Burmese Buddhism. Recently, this group’s primary targets have become Muslims who mass-migrated to Burma under British colonial rule. The group’s stance reminds one of the combative Burmese monks whom we have seen appear in the news headlines more and more often. Foxeus concludes his fascinating treatment with a consideration of how these Buddhists justify violence doctrinally, in other words, how bringing about someone’s death is not a violation of the Buddhist precept of non-violence. In the next contribution to the second part, Keiko Tosa provides a detailed overview of how *weikza* are called upon to ensure the successful completion of pagodas. In the process, *weikza* can often steer the construction of such pagodas to reflect their personal viewpoints.

The last part of the book continues the trend of Tosa’s examination by detailing other *weikza* practices. Thomas Patton documents how sacred diagrams are constructed and used. This focus on non-canonical material allows him to criticize conventional approaches to Buddhism, which tend to be normative in trying to discern the “real” Buddhism. Patton shows that such approaches are not only misguided; they also play into the hands of those who would cast Burma as a protector of such a “pure” Buddhism. The last two chapters of the volume, by Céline Coderey and Guillaume Rozenberg, both address the roles of *weikza* as healers of non-conventional diseases. Coderey

does this within Arakan, a province located in the periphery of Burma. Despite being located at the fringes, Arakan healers nevertheless utilize the prestige of *weikza* to boost the power and prestige of their healing practices. Finally, Guillaume Rozenberg further explores one specific healing practice, namely exorcism. He is concerned mainly with how *weikza* exorcists see their own practice, which he situates between active and passive: on the one hand, the exorcist lets another power act through him. On the other, the manifestation of this power depends on his personal virtues.

In exploring a phenomenon about which we know comparatively little, *Champions of Buddhism* does a superb job. The volume is very well organized, beautifully illustrated, and the contributions are consistently of high quality. My criticisms stem mostly from my position as neither an expert on Burma nor an anthropologist. Since this material is in dialogue with the larger theme of Buddhism and modernity, it could have provided interested readers from different fields a better way in by providing a comprehensive glossary. Such a glossary is included, but at merely three pages it is wholly insufficient for a reader for whom many of the Burmese and Pāli terms will be unfamiliar. For example, in the opening essay sentences like the following caused me pause: “Way-a-zawta [a monk] promised his followers *sotāpanna* through *anāgāmī* status if they would follow his teachings” (p. 4). Another problem is that the preoccupation with documenting phenomena that were previously not described (such as the building of pagodas, how magical inscriptions work, and so on) prevents many of the contributors in the book from making more solid connections with the socio-political realities of post-colonial Burma. For example, though we are consistently told that *weikza* are politically marginalized, a consistent analysis of why this is the case is not provided. As I said before, the preface and postscript partly address this problem, but it would have been better had such connections been integrated throughout the volume. However, these are minor objections to a work that both continues exciting conversations and breaks new ground.

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